

# The Atheist

April 1998

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## So, What's Wrong With A Little Prayer?

The Istook Religious Freedom Amendment says: "To secure the people's right to acknowledge God according to the dictates of conscience: Neither the United States nor any State shall establish any official religion, but the people's right to pray and to recognize their religious beliefs, heritage, or traditions on public property, including schools, shall not be infringed. Neither the United States nor any State shall require any person to join in prayer or other religious activity, prescribe school prayers, discriminate against religion, or deny equal access to a benefit on account of religion."

So, why must we reject the Istook Religious Freedom Amendment? Because the First Amendment already does the job of protecting liberty! There simply is no reason to amend the Constitution to provide religion with any more protection than it already has. In spite of the hype created by the theocratic right, virtually no cases of discrimination against Christians occur in this country. It is fairly easy for any individual who feels the need to start up a church, and, in spite of the misinformation spread by the theocratic right, students are allowed to pray in school. They may also conduct prayer and bible-study groups, carry bibles, and wear religious jewelry and t-shirts. Their only limitation is that they may not force their views on a captive audience. As long as the information is presented objectively, religion can be discussed in public school classrooms.

Another reason for rejecting the Istook amendment is the "Santa Claus" effect: I have heard it said by other atheists that allowing the RFA to become law would make the "God" concept legitimate. This reasoning is based on the movie "Miracle on 34th Street." Santa Claus was considered real because the U.S. Post Office delivered letters to him, and the post office wouldn't lie about his existence now, would they? If this seems

like a stretch, think about the number of times religionists have told you that America must be a Christian country because it says “In God We Trust” on our money.

The Religious Freedom Amendment would seriously compromise the intent of the First Amendment by giving free reign to the free exercise clause at the expense of the establishment clause; it would end the protection of religious minorities by allowing one group to overwhelm all others by sheer numbers. As it is, the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment protects our kids from sectarian indoctrination. The RFA, however, would allow religious groups to interfere with the educational process to the detriment of our liberties and safety. Religious schools would be eligible to receive tax money without having to meet state requirements for teacher certification, class size, and nondiscrimination.

The following examples are from a suburban school district in the Austin, Texas area. In these cases, religious interference was curtailed because of challenges based on the First Amendment:

- 1) An assembly was called in which the students heard misleading information about condoms. They were told that condoms cannot stop the AIDS virus because the holes in the latex are too big, and that sex is bad.
- 2) A creationist guest speaker was asked to visit a high school honors biology class. The intent was to “balance” the teaching of evolution. This clearly violates an important Supreme Court decision on creationism.
- 3) A group of students was allowed to use the school public address system to lead Christian prayers during the morning announcements.
- 4) A student bible club was allowed to cover an office window with religious t-shirts. School supplies were used to promote the group. The effect was to give Christianity an official look.
- 5) A pregnant teenager considered a legal abortion. A group of Christian teachers took her into a small room and pressured her to turn to their god.
- 6) A social studies teacher treats Old Testament bible myths as if they were historical facts. No mention of other religious, or nonreligious, beliefs is made.
- 7) A science teacher refused to teach evolution because it

conflicts with her personal beliefs.

8) A guest speaker told a group of kids that abortions are bad, and will cause physical damage to 25% of the women having them.

9) A teacher applying for a job was asked about his religion.

These stories are real. It was possible to resolve many of them because of the First Amendment. If the Religious Freedom Amendment passes, this, and more, will change. In many places around the world, unprotected diversity leads to armed conflict, but the principle of state/church separation has allowed Americans to live in relative peace and harmony for over 200 years. Our diversity has proven to be an enormous asset both socially and economically. We need to retain laws that protect religious minorities from the tyranny of the majority. Without the First Amendment, the majority religion in any particular region will be unstoppable. The Religious Freedom Amendment would allow churches and individuals to establish a de facto Christian theocracy. In theory, this amendment would seem to support any religion. In practice, it will make evangelical Christianity our state religion.

## **What Atheism Has To Offer**

Atheists are frequently asked what atheism has to offer as opposed to religion. To answer this question, I need to assume that there are no gods or supernatural entities to reward us with a peaceful eternity if we follow some established morality. If the reason for this assumption is proven false, then the question is meaningless, as atheism ceases to exist.

The purpose of this article is not to validate the assumption; that has already been done by others who are more skilled than I (you can investigate ACA's bookstore for good sources). My purpose is to address the question, "Given that there are no gods, what does atheism have to offer as opposed to religion?" I will mainly refer to the Christian religion because it is prevalent in the United States and its precepts have been

disproved.

First, we need to look at what religion offers. Given that followers of Christianity will not attain a preferred status after death, why do so many people still deprive themselves of money, time, and pleasures? It would be easy to dismiss them by saying they are not intelligent or educated enough to realize they are being misguided. However, there have been, and still are, many remarkable people who follow this doctrine. Atheists usually say that Christianity's followers cannot accept their own insignificance in the cosmos, and therefore resort to a belief in a god that cares for them. It makes them feel important.

When Galileo presented his theory and proof that the Earth is not at the center of the universe, but that it orbits the Sun, he endured very strong opposition from religious leaders. He was forced to deny his theory under the threat of death, and later was imprisoned. Why did the religious leaders do this, when the evidence showed that the Earth did indeed move around the Sun? Although this theory contradicted their beliefs, it did not endanger their religion. We now know beyond doubt that the Earth moves around the Sun, and religion is still very much alive.

Galileo was persecuted because his theory challenged the idea that we are at the center of the universe (and therefore the favorites of its "creator"), and presented the possibility of our insignificance. This dread of being insignificant is the reason people believe in a god, but this belief is not reached objectively. One does not say, "I don't want to feel insignificant, so I will believe that the Earth is the center of the universe and that there is a creator who loves me." But the yearning to have this be true predisposes most people to ignore the evidence around them. It is not stupidity, merely human nature.

Even when Christians admit that this reasoning is, or might be, true, they still think that religion is good. They will argue that Christianity provides a set of morals, in the form of the Ten Commandments, that keeps society organized and brings happiness to those who cannot bear being so small compared to the cosmos. These two things are touted as the contributions given to society by religion.

However, do we need to deprive ourselves of time, money,

and pleasures to have a set of rules such as “do not kill,” and “do not steal”? Since most atheists in the world do not cause harm to others, it is obvious that we can have ethics without having a religion. In fact, since the percentage of religious convicts is higher than the percentage of religious people in society at large, we might even assume that religious morals go against living in a civilized society.

As for religion being a sort of “crutch” to those who cannot deal with reality, is religion helpful by feeding lies to people to keep them happy? Is Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, where the mass of society is content without a grasp of reality, what we really want? I, for one, do not. For me, happiness is seeing the immensity of the cosmos and understanding the physical concepts that explain how stars radiate light, how planets are formed, and how we are closely related to every other plant and animal on Earth. I admire the great civilizations that we humans have created.

We can send people to outer space and even to our Moon and know that we are not an isolated race created at the whim of some god. More than ninety-eight percent of our DNA code is shared by the chimpanzees. It is humbling and gratifying to me to know that I am so closely related to other species on our small planet.

So far, I have only shown that the “contributions” to society from religion are harmless pranks at best. But getting back to our original question, “What does atheism have to offer?” The knowledge that we are responsible for our actions and our future, for one thing, although some of us might not want to accept that responsibility. We gain great freedom when we realize that we can decide what we want to do and be, unrestrained by some supernatural entity.

Atheism removes the guilt from doing those harmless, enjoyable things that religion has classified as sins. By acknowledging that there are no gods, we can be happier. You may say that people are happy believing they will live in heaven eternally. However, I propose that we make a greater contribution to society when we show others how to be happy by doing the things we enjoy while giving up the lie of eternal reward.

Another contribution of atheism is that it frees people of

preconceptions, allowing them to be more creative and inventive. It is true that many believers of religions have had amazing creations and ideas. Einstein is usually brought up by religious people as an example. Einstein believed in “God,” and he still came up with the theory of relativity, a great advance in physics and in our understanding of the universe. But we should also remember Einstein’s famous quote: “I don’t believe that God would play dice with the universe” (paraphrased). This referred to quantum mechanics theory, which he rejected not because of his intellectual studies of it, but because of his preconceptions of a god. Well, quantum mechanics theory has been proven to be correct. Was Einstein a fool? No, he was only restricted by his beliefs. If he had not believed in a god, he might have given both relativity and quantum mechanics to society. I still greatly appreciate his contribution of relativity, and I admire the work and the leap of intuition that it took for him to formulate it.

Finally, I can only say that I believe the contributions of atheism to society are great. Atheism not only allows us to lead happy, fulfilled lives in a civilized society, but also liberates our minds to explore the questions of life and the cosmos. By exploring these matters, we can make great discoveries that can improve the lives of all human beings.

Religion hasn’t completely stopped us from doing this, but, as in the case of Einstein, it has certainly slowed us down. I have reached the conclusion that atheism has a very positive influence on the lives of everyone.

—anonymous

## **Book Review**

So, what’s wrong with a little prayer? It’s not like it really matters. Even if you don’t agree with the content of the prayer, you can just stay quiet out of respect for those who do believe. It’s no big deal. Anyway, the Christians are in the majority, so they have a right to pray in public places. You do believe in majority rule, don’t you?

If you are at all impressed by such arguments, then you need to understand that our public schools are at ground zero in a war being waged by Christian zealots. Only by taking over the

education of young minds, or by destroying the public school system altogether, can the theocratic right hope to control the future.

*Without a Prayer, Religious Expression in Public Schools*, by Robert S. Alley, provides an excellent introduction to both the history of state/church separation and the context in which major decisions are currently being made. His thoroughly documented arguments and case studies make this book a must-read for all those serious about understanding the school prayer issue.

The author draws attention to the two-pronged assault on education currently being made by the theocratic right. On the one hand, public education, as well as individual educators, are being attacked as immoral and antireligious. Theocrats frequently claim that what is being taught in schools violates the Free Exercise clause. Their goal is to foster a nationwide hatred for Supreme Court decisions that may help pave the way for a religious amendment to the U.S. Constitution. On the other hand, they are pushing to divert tax dollars to religious schools in the form of vouchers. To accomplish their goal of establishing a Christian school system, America's theocrats are willing to sacrifice the education of millions of children.

Recent efforts to subordinate the Establishment clause to the Free Exercise clause include the Istook Religious Freedom Amendment. Although Alley's book predates this particular amendment, it certainly predicted it. A school prayer amendment, such as Istook's, would cause a dramatic rethinking of U.S. Supreme Court decisions dating back to the 1940s. It would open the floodgates for religious proselytizing and domination.

Nothing in the U.S. Constitution can be found to support this view of the theocratic right. As the author points out, "Only complete separation of church and state, with absolutely no establishment, will guarantee free exercise of religion. To whatever degree a form of establishment, no matter how mild, enters the Constitution through the amending process, free exercise is dust. If free exercise is a natural right not conferred by any state, then allowance for the control of conscience of any person or group, no matter how

small, is a denial of the principle of free exercise for all others whatsoever. Indeed there are degrees of establishment but there are no degrees of freedom of conscience: it's all or none."

Following the introductory chapters, Alley includes the heartbreaking stories of a number of families who stood up for the principle of state/church separation. Those involved belong to that small minority of citizens who actually understand the ideals found in the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The majority of these stories do

not involve atheists, which should remind us that we must look beyond our own group for allies in the struggle to preserve our basic liberties. As James Madison wrote in his Memorial and Remonstrance, "Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other sects?"

Without compromising our non-belief, atheists must find a way to spread this message to all who will listen.

Many of us will be able to identify with the individuals named in the case studies. We might wonder, however, why theocrats expend so much energy for the sake of simple prayers during morning announcements. A common belief among Christian fundamentalists, and one that has very real consequences for atheists, is that nations as a whole are able to sin against the Christian god. Alley tells the story of how Billy Graham would warn that unless America turned to Jesus, "God" would use the atheist Soviet Union to punish us all with atomic bombs and bullets. This type of thinking tends to make school prayer a very important issue to millions of Americans who might otherwise be willing to extend basic rights to nonbelievers. After all, who wants to get spanked with a scud missile by Jesus just because some Jew or atheist won't join in a prayer over the school's P.A. system?

As many of the stories demonstrate, those wanting to push religion in schools are often quite willing to break the law. In more than one case, the antagonist simply continues to conduct illegal prayers, even after being ordered to stop by the courts. Threats of violence are also common against those who speak out against school prayers. As they told Vashti McCollum and

her elementary school children, “We will make some lovely incisions in your filthy bellies and pull out those nervy Guts one by one, slow and easy,” and, “You slimy bastard, may your filthy rotten soul roast in hell.” (“The declaration that religious faith shall be unpunished, does not give impunity to criminal acts dictated by religious error . . .” —Jefferson to Madison.)

My one disagreement with the author concerns his disbelief that Christians could be so horrible to each other. In his introduction, he uses the quote, “How can Christians have such evil ways?” originally asked by USA Today correspondent Barbara Reynolds. To answer that, we have to realize that Christianity, by its very nature, is the antithesis of democracy and decency. If you doubt this, read how infidels were treated by Old Testament law. Then read Matthew 5:17, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law of the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” “The free men of America did not wait until usurped power had strengthened itself by exercise, and entangled the question in precedents. They saw all the consequences in the principle, and they avoided the consequences by denying the principle” —James Madison.

(Without a Prayer, Religious Expression in Public Schools, by Robert S. Alley, published by Prometheus Books, 1996.)

## **My Life As A Young Atheist**

Since I was about 12, I’ve known that I didn’t believe in a “higher power.” Most would say that there is no problem with thinking this way, but there is. Adults would not take me seriously, they would go on to tell me that I was just in a phase and I would meet one day with “God.” I still hear this as a seventeen year old.

I live in Webster, MA., a religious town where everyone goes to church, except my family, who were never really into that kind of thing. My mother was baptized as a Catholic, but she doesn’t really believe there is a “God” either. My father, who is no longer part of my life, claims he saw Jesus, so everyone

knows he is a fruitcake. One of my brothers is not a believer, and the other is pagan.

My family and friends accept me as I am, but some of my friends' parents don't. To this day, I still have friends whose parents will not allow them to come to my house. They are afraid I will try to convert their kids, which is extremely ridiculous. I am not the type to harass someone for being a Catholic or anything, I believe that everyone chooses their beliefs and they shouldn't be criticized for it.

I have no atheist friends, groups, or TV shows I can watch here, although I wish I did so much. I tried once to get a group going, and the only responses from my ad were two Christian women trying to talk me into going to the Sunday Mass.

Luckily, I have already found the love of my life, and he agrees with me that baptizing the children would not be right, that they need to grow up and choose what they want to be part of. My fiancé is Sean, and he is Catholic.

Being trashed for being an atheist is not fun at all. I have been hurt deeply inside due to not being accepted at times by people because I don't believe in what everyone else does. I stand up for what I believe in, even if it hurts me along the way. If I don't help stand up for atheists, no one but other atheists will, and I believe it is my duty to help others like me. —Jennifer Smith

(Ed: Jennifer lives in Massachusetts, and came across ACA on the internet.)

## **Announcements**

ACA Election May 3, at Hot Jumbo Bagel, 307 West 5th Street, 10:30 a.m.

Yearly Dues Many of you joined us last May; we welcome anyone who has not yet renewed their membership to do so now to maintain their voting rights in ACA and to keep receiving The Atheist.

Blood Drive The next Blood Drive will be held from 10 a.m.–2 p.m. on Saturday, June 20, at the Central Texas Regional Blood

Center at 4300 N. Lamar. Local atheists will be able to draw from this ACA account for up to a year. Please consider donating, especially if you have a rare blood type such as O negative.

**Lecture Series** We are hosting a guest speaker on the last (formerly the first) Sunday of every month. Lectures will be held at the Furr's Cafeteria in Northcross Mall at 11 a.m. A question and answer session will follow. Admission is free, however, the management at Furr's requests that we go through the line.

**Weekly Meetings** Sunday mornings at Hot Jumbo Bagel, 307 West 5th Street at 10:30 a.m. on the Sundays when lectures are not scheduled at Furr's Cafeteria.

**Happy Hour** Let's get together on the third Friday of the month. Details to come.

**Movie Night** Let's meet at the Alamo Drafthouse for a movie. Admission is \$1; dinner and drinks are available for purchase. Good reality-based company and conversation, no extra charge!

**Randalls Donations** Randalls will donate a percentage of the money you spend there to the Atheist Community of Austin. To take advantage of this offer, contact the customer service department of your nearest Randalls. The ACA number is 5158.

For more information about any of these coming events, call (512) 371-2911 or e-mail [atheist@atheist-community.org](mailto:atheist@atheist-community.org)

## **Non-ACA Texas Atheist Happenings**

**Freethinker Cenotaph** The Heart of Texas (HOT) Freethinkers are in the process of erecting a monument dedicated to Texas Freethinkers. This 8' X 4' monolith, topped with an eagle, will be placed in Comfort City Park at a site already approved by the Comfort Chamber of Commerce. They are hoping to complete this project by October, which is Freethinking Month.

Send donations to: Comfort Heritage Foundation, Attn: Eugene Konde, Treasurer, P.O. Box 433, Comfort, Texas 78013. Checks should be made out to the Comfort Heritage Foundation and noted on the bottom: "Freethinker monument." For more information about this project, contact: Ed Scharf, P.O. Box 305, Helotes, Texas 78023 (e-mail: edscharf@hotmail.com).

Dallas Debate A debate on the topic: "Why I Am/Why I Am Not A Christian" will be held at the Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas on Monday, June 15 from 7–9 p.m. The debaters will be William Lane Craig and Keith Parsons. The debate is free, although donations to cover costs will be appreciated. The organizers expect between four and five thousand people to attend, and it is one of their main goals to get as close a split (50/50) between Christians and non-Christians as possible. There is a confirmed radio broadcast time on 94.9 FM. For more details, contact Walter Nusbaum (email: walter@thechoicenet.com).